

The Wolf Wilder Chapter 9



White woke her the next morning. Wolves make very emphatic alarm clocks: Feo had no choice but to sit up before she drowned in wolf spit.

‘All right! I’m here. I’m awake.’ She wiped her eyes and pushed away the wolf’s tongue, which was trying to infiltrate her nose.

Alexei stood at a distance, watching. The expression on his face was unfamiliar: full of purpose, and something like respect.

‘Here,’ he said. He handed her a cup of steaming liquid. In his other hand he held the

pup, and under his arm an axe. ‘The white one was scratching at the door. I came out for firewood.’ He looked down at Grey, at the slant of her shoulders, the yellow of her eyes and the elegance of her ears.

‘That’s very much not a dog.’ And, when she didn’t reply, ‘That’s a wolf, isn’t it?’

Feo scrambled to her feet. She tried to bluff, to make her voice haughty. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘Ilya accidentally mentioned it. Sasha wasn’t happy. She tends to express unhappiness with broken objects, so I came outside. I know who you are now.’

Feo busied herself with White, checking the velvet bandage, feeling her nose. She said nothing.

‘You *are* the girl Rakov’s men are after. I mean, I guessed you might be. But I thought it was just a rumour. I mean, a wolf girl blinding Rakov. You know. It sounds crazy.’

'It does sound crazy,' said Feo. She held the pup up to her face. He licked her forehead, and she breathed in his sweet dusty animal smell.

The pup was boisterous after his sleep, and his claws tangled in her hair. 'Did Ilya look after him?' she asked.

'Yes; and I woke up before Ilya, so I fed him.'

'What did you feed him?' Feo hadn't meant it to sound so sharp.

'Milk and water.'

'Oh, that's fine! I mean – thank you.' She smiled awkwardly.

He grinned and nodded at her cup, which she had set down in the snow. 'Drink it quickly. It's hot, but not delicious. When it stops being hot, it starts being undrinkable.'

Feo drank it. It scorched her gums, and she stuffed it into her cheeks, gasping. 'What is it?' she asked, muffled.

'Tea. Sort of. Well, it's the last dust of berries from the summer – dried – and the apple water

from last night. And a bit of burnt toffee. And sugar. Ilya found some sugar lumps in his pack. It's got energy in it, if nothing else, and it'll warm you.'

'Thank you. It's –' she couldn't say it was nice, when it so manifestly was not – 'wet,' she said.

He hunkered down beside her in the snow, a safe distance from the still-sleeping wolves.

'So,' he said, 'I've got a small question.'

'All right.'

'What were you doing in the middle of a field with a pack of wolves in the worst storm in twelve years?'

'That's more of a medium-sized question,' said Feo, but she grinned. She hefted the pup closer to her heart and told him: about Tenderfoot, about Rakov and his black patches of madness, about her mother and about her journey to Kresty jail.

Alexei was not a good listener: he interrupted, and laughed in unexpected places, and threw a

lot of snow in the air when she told him about Rakov's eye, but at last the story got told.

'And who is there besides your mother?' he asked when she had finished. 'Is Ilya some kind of relation?'

'No! Definitely not. He's just a boy I know.' Feo stopped, considered. 'He's all right, though. He's good.'

'Good.'

'He's got skinny wrists, but a muscly brain. He's read a lot of books. But at home it's just us: me and Mama. And the wolves.' Feo wished she could explain – that the beauty of the world is itself a kind of company, and they lived in one of the most beautiful spots in the world. 'You can make the snow a kind of friend, if you know how.'

'Tell me more about your home before they burnt it. What was it like?'

Feo gave the pup her forefinger to chew on. 'Do you know the feeling when it's raining

outside, but you have a fire? And you've got wolves licking your hands and trying to eat the rug. That's what happiness is.'

'Yes! I know that feeling. Well, not the wolves, but the rest.'

'And Mama and I would roast chestnuts and dip them in cream. There's a wire net to roast them in so they don't get burnt. At least, there was.' Feo flinched at the thought, and the pup mewed in protest. 'I suppose that's gone now.'

'Exactly! They destroyed your home! Doesn't that make you want to fight?'

Feo shrugged. 'I'm going to go and get Mama, and we're going to rebuild the house. Somewhere new. We'll make it exactly like it was.'

'You'll need help. Kresty jail isn't a friendly place. I know people who have been in it.'

'I have Ilya,' she said. 'I have wolves.'

'Listen, I want to make a bargain with you.' He looked much older than fifteen as he said it.

'Will you?'

Feo narrowed her eyes. 'Depends what it is.'

'I need help. People are frightened of the Tsar – and even more of Rakov.'

'Well ... if I was going to choose someone to be afraid of, it would be him. Rakov. Have you seen his face? He's not sane.'

Alexei nodded, his face serious. 'You could use his soul as a skating rink. But that's the point – my parents, and Sasha and her husband, and all my friends – they think there's nothing we can do.'

'Isn't that sort of true?'

'Of course not! But there's only one thing that will make them willing to fight back.'

Feo gestured at the soot that had turned the snow black in patches. 'I would have thought burning their houses would do that.'

'No! It scared them stiff – literally. They all talk like he's some kind of evil spirit, but he's just a man: you hurt him! He's coming after

you, a twelve-year-old girl! You're barely big enough to touch the top of the door frame, but you nearly killed him! You're proof that he's not invincible!'

'I don't think I nearly killed him.' Feo was eager to have accuracy on this point.

'I need stories. Stories like yours. You could shock people into action. Stories can start revolutions.'

'I thought that man you were talking about last night ... Lenny? I thought *he* was going to start your revolution.'

'Lenin's been exiled to Siberia. And Lenin doesn't care about Rakov; he only cares about the Bolsheviks. I need *you*, Feo.'

'I don't have time for revolutions. I have to be in the city by Friday! It's Sunday already.'

'No, listen! It would only need a single village-worth of people to begin. Other people would join us.' He grinned, a smile that stretched his whole face into something impish and wild, and

Feo wrinkled her nose. People should not be allowed to be so beautiful and so mad. One or other, not both. He said, 'We could change the whole world!'

Feo shook her head. The pup began to scabble at her wrist, hoping to draw milk from her fingertip.

'Feo, ignore the pup for a second. Half of my village wants to fight. But the other half wants to wait it out. They say if we do anything – anything at all – Rakov will just get worse.' Feo rearranged her sleeve to stop the pup scraping all her wrist skin off. 'Listen, Feo – I need your help. You've got to come and tell the village what happened. If a kid like you was ready to fight him, it would make the others ashamed not to. It would make them believe it was possible.'

Feo thought about it: it hurt to disappoint him. But, 'I can't. I need to get to Mama.'

Please! Just come with me to the village. You

wouldn't have to say anything. Just ... prove I wasn't making you up. Because ... I might have embroidered things, sometimes. But if you were there!'

'But your revolution is nothing to do with me, Alexei! I have to get to Kresty.'

Alexei bit his lips and changed tactic. 'Then you'll need food. We ate everything you had last night.'

'I can hunt –'

'And there are things you don't know, about the city – about the soldiers and the gates.'

Feo looked up, her heart dropping. 'Are there? What?'

'I'll tell you, *if* you come with me to the village.'

'That's blackmail!'

'Bribery.' His eyes – huge, thick-lashed, grinning – met hers. 'There's a difference.'

Feo shook her head. 'I'm not interested in politics. I just want Mama. And ... I'm sorry,

truly, but I don't think it would work.'

'Well, now you're being boring,' he said, standing up.

'I'm being honest!'

'That's the thing, though! If you pick the most depressing answer,' said Alexei, 'you get to say you're "brutally honest". But I say it *would* work, and I once punched a bear in the face.'

'Are ... those two things connected?'

'Yes,' said Alexei. 'I have brutally honest fists. People say we can't do anything about the way the world is; they say it's set in stone. I say it *looks* like stone, but it's mostly paint and cardboard. *Believe* me. I'll help you, if you'll help me.'

Feo squinted. 'I'm ... not sure I absolutely understand. I've never punched a bear. I headbutted an eagle once, but that was an accident. But Rakov took Mama -'

'Exactly!' Alexei interrupted. His whole face glittered with purpose. 'He kills people, Feo! It's

not just about your mother. Don't you want to fight, for *yourself*? For people like my sister - so her baby doesn't grow up to watch *her* world burn? I didn't think you were the kind of person who would want to live on her knees.'

Feo looked at his face, stark and vivid and streaked with wolf spit. 'If you promise to tell me about the gates and get us food - real food - I'll come.'